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**SWAROVSKI BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN
DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE NORTH AMERICAN SWAROVSKI BIRDING
COMMUNITY**

Information, communication, and inspiration on birds, wildlife, and nature

February 2005

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GREETINGS!

Welcome to the tenth "Swarovski Birding E-bulletin" for North America. This communication appears monthly, and is intended to keep friends and associates informed about news and information on birds, birding, and bird conservation.

We continue in 2005 with our new partner in producing and distributing this E-bulletin, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). Since bird appreciation and refuge visitation are so intricately intertwined, it's a perfect fit.

We welcome your distribution of all or parts of this E-bulletin, only requesting mention of the material's origin. For more details, see the bottom of this E-bulletin.

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RARITY FOCUS

A number of spectacular birds appeared in South Texas in January, but we didn't know which one to profile! Besides, we had already described rarities in South Texas last year three times: July, October, and December. We'll revisit the Lone Star State soon enough. This month we look at a rare species elsewhere.

There are a number of convincing records of Barnacle Goose from Atlantic Canada and the northeastern U.S. Considering that the species nests in Greenland, the possibility of vagrancy to NE North America is always a distinct possibility. Whenever a Barnacle Goose is reported in the Northeastern US, however, controversy inevitably ensues. This is usually because the question of wild origin is always a factor.

Such was the case last month when two or three Barnacle Geese were reported from the central Atlantic States. First, there was a bird found west of Philadelphia, at the Octarara Reservoir, along the Chester-Lancaster County border. The goose was discovered on 7 January, apparently among a large flock of Canada Geese near the west side of the Route 472 causeway across the reservoir. Two days later a Barnacle Goose (the same bird or another?) was seen at the Coatesville Reservoir in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Finally, another Barnacle Goose, this one reported with a band, was found on 12 January on the grounds of the Pickering Creek Audubon Center in Talbot County, Maryland. The origin of the band was undetermined.

No one questions the identity of such birds, yet their origin is almost always in doubt. Despite the fact that the Barnacle Goose is perhaps the most frequently reported "exotic" goose reported on the East Coast of North America, the species is not similarly commonplace in captivity. Moreover, the field reports seem to appear most frequently in winter, often as early as November and as late as April, but not at other times of the year. This would certainly lend credence to the theory of wintering birds occasionally visiting NE North America in winter. It is also interesting to look at patterns of occurrence, such as in the winter of 2001-2002 when Barnacle Geese were found in New Brunswick, Massachusetts (as many as three birds), Connecticut (probably two birds), Rhode Island, New York (at least four birds), New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

Could they all have escaped from the same pen or from the same collection?

Of course, there are glaring examples of just that, such as the family of six Barnacle Geese observed on Cape

Cod Massachusetts in 1991. These birds were ultimately determined to have been of captive origin, having escaped from a collector and nested on Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick, in 1990. Eventually these birds developed their own mini-migration pattern, extending from Cape Sable Island, Nova Scotia, southward to Massachusetts. The moral of this story, "Sometimes it doesn't pay to count your geese, even after they've hatched!"

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GROUSING CONTINUES

Recent estimates suggest that Greater Sage-Grouse populations may have declined 86% from historic levels. One of the prime threats to this species is the loss of quality sagebrush habitat. With this in mind, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) received as many as eight petitions last year to list the Greater Sage-Grouse range-wide as Endangered or Threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The Service began a formal status review in April 2004. (We have previously written about this situation in in 2004: June, July, October, and December.)

During the status review, the USFWS considered both scientific and commercial information on Greater Sage-Grouse and their habitats, initially determining in early December not to list the species. The final decision was officially confirmed early last month by USFWS Director, Steve Williams. According to Williams, the status review was said to be thorough and rigorous, and based on "the best available science." Yet, Williams raised some concern: "At the same time, the status review clearly illustrates the need for continued efforts to conserve sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat on a long-term basis. I commend Federal and state agencies as well as the local working groups for their current efforts to maintain or improve sagebrush habitat and encourage them to continue to move forward with the new plans to develop and implement conservation strategies throughout the grouse's range."

He was obviously referring to such recent efforts as the coordinated analysis by 11 state-based wildlife agencies, "Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-grouse and Sagebrush Habitats," a 600-page conservation evaluation released in June through the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA). Interested readers may see this report at: http://www.ndow.org/wild/sq/resources/greate_sq_cons_assessment.pdf (This comprehensive report is the result of effort by over 100 individuals from the state, federal, and private sectors and the peer review of nine anonymous scientist referees selected by the Ecological Society of America.) The Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have also initiated recent activities to address the Greater Sage-Grouse decline.

While it is hoped that these endeavors will reverse the downward trend in sage-grouse numbers, there is no enforcement strength behind these judgments and recommendations. A cooperative approach involving ranchers, communities, conservationists, and land managers is both admirable and desirable, but is certainly not guaranteed.

Meanwhile, in the 11 western states that are home to the Greater Sage-Grouse, energy companies, developers,

and ranchers who might have faced increased costs and regulatory delays if the species had been listed as Endangered are pleased. They are satisfied with the most recent USFWS announcements, and they feel that they may have dodged a bullet. Indeed, they have. But unless they and others in the region can move quickly to address the pressing needs of the sage ecosystem, that bullet will ricochet and will hit them between the eyes. As we cautioned in December, when considering meaningful conservation action for the Greater Sage-Grouse, "the longer the delay, the more painful the solution."

In a recent article in THE DENVER POST, observer Jon Christensen put it more delicately: "If Westerners succeed at that [cooperative approach to conservation], it will provide compelling evidence that community-based conservation efforts can manage species and ecosystems without the heavy hand of a listing and all of the regulation that follows. But if they fail, it will be on a grand scale. . . It is just the beginning of something that everyone who cares about the future of the West should be watching closely."

Keep watching and stay tuned.

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LEFT BEHIND: NEOTROP LEGISLATION

In the past few years, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA) has helped to fund some of the most creative bird conservation projects in the hemisphere, including work on Buff-breasted Flycatchers in Arizona, protecting Black-capped Vireos and Golden-cheeked Warblers in Mexico, intensifying West Indian Whistling-Duck protection in the Caribbean, and connecting shorebird conservation and rice cultivation in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

In early May of last year, the House Resources Committee voted unanimously to continue the innovative NMBCA for another three years. This move would increase the funding level to \$5 million in FY06, \$10 million in FY07 and \$15 million in FY08, improve the fund-matching requirements from 3-1 to 1-1, and allow for increased participation within Canada.

The intent of this reauthorization was embedded in two identical bills: S. 2547 and the HR 4114. Such changes would be dramatic, expanding the Neotrop Act's scope and muscle throughout the hemisphere, begin giving it the kind of funding it needs, and making some meaningful adjustments that it has required over the past few years.

But the legislation was to be left behind in the closing days of the 108th Congress. The NMBCA provisions had been combined with clarifying legislation concerning the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). Unfortunately, animal rights groups bogged down the combined legislation from reaching the House and Senate floors because the bills would have also removed peculiar federal protection that had recently been interpreted for introduced bird species such as Mute Swans.

The MBTA clarifications were attached to the must-pass Omnibus spending bill in December, which was signed into law, but the NMBCA elements did not go forward.

Right now, the clock is ticking, with the Neotrop Act due to expire after 30 September 2005. In order to get a boosted reauthorization, the NMBCA should be addressed quickly in the 109th Congress. Bill numbers and bi-partisan co-sponsors for NMBCA are forthcoming. We will inform you of developments as they occur. To review some of the past projects recently funded by the NMBCA see:

<http://birdhabitat.fws.gov/NMBCA/images/2004/Projects.pdf>

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IMBD AND COLLISIONS

In 2005, International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) will be examining the obstacles that birds encounter in flight and exploring the many ways that humans may minimize their impacts. The advances that have made in technology invariably contribute to losses in bird life. Cell phone towers, powerlines, windows in homes and office buildings, and even sources of renewable energy, such as wind turbines, create obstacles for birds in flight. While the facts about birds and collisions may be disturbing, the collaboration of biologists, birders, communities, and corporations to develop innovative solutions is hopeful.

IMBD is usually celebrated in most locations in mid-May, and details can be found about this year's IMBD collision theme at: <http://www.birdday.org/>

Last month, we mentioned the ingenious meeting in Chicago on "Birds and Buildings: Creating a Safe Environment," to be held on 11 March 2005. The event is being organized by an impressive mix of governmental, NGO, and professional organizations. You can find details at: <http://www.birdsandbuildings.org/index1024.html>

This month we wish to bring to your attention a recent related study on bird collisions, and efforts to ensure safer flight conditions for migrants at the Empire State Building in New York City. The report's primary

recommendation deals with turning off lights by 10pm on foggy nights. Halogen light illuminating the top 30 floors should also be extinguished as early as possible on foggy evenings. You can see the full report at: http://massbird.org/bbc/ESB%20Fall%20Migration%20Report%202004/ESBFal_IMigrationReport2004.pdf

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"TOUGHER" CARDINAL FOR ARIZONA

Football is tough; don't ever doubt it. The Cardinal logo for the Arizona Cardinals may have served the team for 45 years, but it isn't "tough enough" for the 21st century. Apparently, the bird's head has been altered to appear sleeker and meaner. Team owner, Bill Bidwill unveiled the new look at the end of January. The old Cardinal logo was a rounded figure, sometimes referred to derisively as a "parakeet." No more sweet parakeet, football fans. "We've made the beak much more predatory," said Bidwill, "and much more aggressive. The face is much more streamlined. It's faster looking. The eye has been described as mean, we'll say tough."

The changes are set for the 2006 season opener. It is unclear if the meaner Cardinal will get the team any closer to the Superbowl.

Click here to see the old and new logo: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6877757/>

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NORTH SLOPE OIL - NPR-A DECISION

While many Americans have followed the controversy over drilling at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR, see the January E-Bulletin), few have noticed the disputes around NPR-A. We attempted to bring this to the attention of our readers in July of last year.

In the late 1970s, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was given jurisdiction over the 23.5-million-acre National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A) formerly administered by the Navy. In 1980, Congress authorized leasing and development there, while also directing the Department of the Interior to minimize ecological disturbances. Since then, the area has been the object of a series of leasing openings and compromises, the most important of which was settled in 1998, which balanced the energy development and natural considerations and opened up for drilling some 87 percent of 4.6 million acres in the northeast portion of the NRP-A.

While most of the NPR-A is open to oil development, this lake-pocked northeastern corner has remained protected due to environmental concerns. Unfortunately, that area also is viewed as having the highest oil and gas potential within the reserve.

In June 2004, the BLM in Alaska released its revised development plan for the Northeast portion of the NPR-A, a plan which would open a large portion of the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area, thereby potentially subjecting 387,000 acres previously closed to drillers in the 1998 compromise. The area in question is a productive bird and wildlife area. For example 30 percent of all Pacific Brant, tens of thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese, small populations of Spectacled, Steller's, and King Eiders, as well as nesting loons, other waterfowl, and shorebirds habitually use this area.

Many environmental and conservation groups, from the Sierra Club to the Wilderness Society and Ducks Unlimited, have urged continued protection of the Teshekpuk Lake region, noting that almost all of the NPR-A is already available to oil companies.

Henri Bisson, the BLM's Alaska director, has outlined the planned opening and has called the decision on the northeastern corner "one of the most difficult projects that we have attempted yet at BLM," adding that the reason was simple: "The country needs access to its oil and gas resources and this area is a petroleum reserve." Interior Secretary Gale Norton signed the document finalizing the BLM's management plan on 22 January.

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REFUGE HONORS

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) will honor National Wildlife Refuge System supporters this month and will also recognize two Refuge System employees next month.

The first two awards recognize exceptional contributions made by dedicated individuals or groups toward protecting the National Wildlife Refuge System. The presentation will take place in conjunction with the 2005 National Refuge Friends Conference, which runs from 5 February through 7 February in Washington, D.C.

Ervin Davis will receive the "Volunteer of the Year Award." In addition to participating in bluebird monitoring, duck banding, the annual Big Game Census, and the Annual Bison Roundup, Ervin also shares his computer

duck banding, the annual Big Game Census, and the Annual Bison Roundup, Ervin also shares his computer skills with the refuge staff and his knowledge of birds and other wildlife with visitors to the National Bison Range in Montana. His meticulous work monitoring bluebird nesting habits has documented the first known case of breeding Western Bluebirds at the Bison Range. Ervin's volunteer service at the range began in 1983.

Friends of Black Bayou will receive the "Friends Group of the Year Award." The group has been particularly successful in promoting public involvement in and appreciation of the Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana as well as in raising funds to support major refuge improvement projects. Projects have included the construction of a fully-equipped wetlands learning center.

Next month, NWRA and NFWF will recognize two National Wildlife Refuge System employees for their exceptional contribution to protecting the Refuge System. The ceremony will take place in conjunction with the 70th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Arlington, Virginia.

Laura Brandt of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, in Florida, will receive the "Refuge System Employee of the Year Award." Roy Lowe, manager of the Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex, will receive the "Paul Kroegel Refuge Manager of the Year Award."

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BIRDS AND WETLAND RESOURCE

For a timely resource on birds and wetlands, try the "Migratory Bird & Wetland NewsLink." It's a bi-monthly news service that connects migratory-bird-and-wetland information embracing their connections and highlighting their international importance. Right now, the NewsLink is attempting to bridge the communication gaps between professionals in the fields of migratory bird and wetland habitat conservation. It's a thoughtful endeavor: <http://birdsandwetlands.com/>

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PALE MALE PROGRESS

And for those who are interested, Pale Male and Lola, the world's most famous Red-tailed Hawks living in New York City, have been observed at 927 Fifth Avenue, either perching nearby or bringing in sticks to their renovated nest-site during January. Nest activity ought to increase this month. Details can be found at: www.palemale.com

Footnote: Lincoln Karim, the Pale Male defender who had been arrested in December for allegedly harassing Paula Zahn and her family, residents of 927 Fifth Avenue, had all charges dropped in court on 26 January. (He also had his job restored along with back pay.)

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If you have a friend who wants to get future copies of the North American Swarovski Birding E-bulletin, have them contact:

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